

DP: You must have given hundreds, if not thousands, of interviews by now. So how do you feel about doing them after 30 years' worth?

JGB: I'm happy to do interviews. Part of the reason is that I do fair bit of book-reviewing... In fact, I have this collection of my reviews of the last 30 years, *A User's Guide to the Millennium*, just out; and one reason I was never enthusiastic about seeing them collected until now was because they're all very *reactive* – I'm reacting to other people's ideas and imaginations, and never really giving my own original notions. Whereas in interviews, of course, I can actually say what I think – not what I think about somebody else. If you want to see what I think about a large number of topics, look at the *Re/Search* book that came out ten years ago [*Re/Search: J. G. Ballard*, edited by Andrea Juno and Vale, Re/Search Publications, San Francisco, 1984]. Look at the conversations I had with Vale and Juno, or the interviews I've done with you and others. So, I'm quite happy to fly the latest kites; I always seem to have one or two kites to put up into the air.

One reviewer of the *Re/Search* book, referring to the very long interview in there, said that "the interview is eminently Ballard's medium." What do you think of a remark like that?

As opposed to my fiction, he means? Well, one can be totally explicit in an interview, say what one thinks about anything. I can give you my views on everything from the Common Market Agricultural Policy, to the future of NATO, to the Impressionist display at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, but to weave those topics into fiction would be difficult to do. Fiction is something quite other than mere opinion. In my interviews I express my opinions;

that's very different from my novels and short stories – I'm not expressing my opinions there, I'm inventing imaginary worlds. My fiction doesn't constitute a body of opinions. It's just that I've always had a lot of ideas – I know *nothing* about a huge number of topics! – and, like most people, I don't mind airing my views. If one day a book of collected interviews was published, it would give a very different impression of me than would my fiction. But I prefer to think that the fiction is what I'm here for: a lot of saloon-bar opinions on this and that are neither one thing nor the other.



Photo: Declan O'Neill

Some readers expected your last novel, *Rushing to Paradise*, to be full of "opinions" – because of the way it was blurbed and trailed, as "anti-feminist" and "anti-Green movement"...

It's a gentle satire at the expense of the extremist fringes of the feminist and Green movements – but that's well overdue, isn't it? I have two daughters who have benefited enormously from the advances of the feminist movement of the last 30 years. They wouldn't be doing the jobs they are doing now, had they been in my generation when they were setting out on their careers. So, I support mainstream, middle-of-the-road feminism. But I was concerned, in *Rushing to*

Paradise, with the way in which fanatics – single-issue fanatics in particular – climb aboard otherwise respectable movements, shoulder aside those at the helm and set the ship on a course of their own. We've seen that: the recent French nuclear tests and some of the activities of Greenpeace – not just in respect of Mururoa, but of the *Brent Spar* oil rig – they really did show there how myopic and ill-informed a so-called environmental group with its finger on the pulse can be.

I think some people might disagree with the word "gentle"!

The satire? Yes, but the satiric elements in that book are all concentrated, really, in the first half. The second half of the book looks at something that lies beyond satire, which is the way in which obsessive and paranoid personalities can begin to remake the worlds around them in their own nightmare image. If you look at, say, what went on in the Frederick West murder trial – it was a trial of the husband rather than the wife – that was beyond satire: you couldn't write a satire about the West household. And when Dr Barbara really gets going on Saint Esprit, in the last third of *Rushing to Paradise*, I'm following the course of someone who is accelerating down a rollercoaster towards near-total disaster. So, the satire is at the beginning; the first half of the book, I think, is satire.

Talking of satire, would you say Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* has ever been an influence on you?

Yes, I'm sure it has. The first book in particular – enormously, I would think. That plus *The Ancient Mariner* are practically the foundation-stones of everything I've written. *The Tempest* also, for some peculiar reason, is a big influence on me; and *Robinson Crusoe*. Those are very important books – *Gulliver*, *Crusoe*, even the *Alice* books to some extent. One reads them at a very early age, and they shape one's view of what I would call the world of "alternative" fiction: non-naturalistic fiction that creates a parallel world which comments on our own. *The Tempest* is rather different, and *The Ancient Mariner* for that matter; but yes, they all certainly were big influences on me – much more than anything else. I can't think of anything else... the *Arabian Nights* tales, possibly.

The others have all been mentioned fairly frequently by critics (well, maybe not *The Arabian Nights*), and by yourself, in commenting on your work; but I don't recall many mentions of *Gul-*

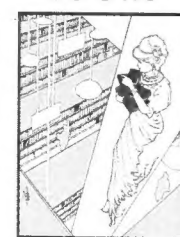
Appearing as unexpectedly as a black monolith in orbit around Jupiter, and as pregnant with burgeoning intelligence, Dan Simmons's *The Hyperion Cantos* synthesized the best of all sf that had gone before it into one glorious, architecturally precise catalogue. Its narrative structure modelled upon Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, its subtext echoing Keats's unfinished poem on the fall of old gods and the rise of new, this fierce and densely imagined space opera followed seven pilgrims making their way towards the Time Tombs on the obscure world of Hyperion while the interstellar civilization of the Hegemony lurched towards Armageddon. At the end, the Time Tombs opened, their guardian, the fearsome Shrike, appeared and took a sacrifice, and the various factions of AIs living in the interstices of the FTL fatlines and farcasters which knit the Hegemony together agreed to spare humanity but withdrew their blessing, severing the lines of instant communication and wrecking the Hegemony forever.

As a Public Service Announcement, I should point out that *Endymion* (Bantam, \$22.95; Headline, £16.99) is not the sequel to *The Hyperion Cantos* but precisely one half of it – necessary because nowhere in the proof copy is this made clear. And while it is not strictly necessary to have read *The Hyperion Cantos* to understand *Endymion*, it is a book rife with echoes that deepen the doubled strands of its plot.

It is some 250 years later, and Aenae, the daughter of one of the Time Tomb pilgrims, Brawne Lamia, and her lover, a cybrid recreation of the poet John Keats, is about to emerge from the Time Tombs. Human civilization is dominated by the Pax, whose austere Catholicism bestows the blessing of physical reconstitution after death for its followers by use of cruciform symbionts which store human memory and personality. Aenae threatens their status quo because she promises a resynthesis between humanity and at least one faction of the AIs, who have discovered that there are "lions and tigers and bears" – advanced alien intelligences which may have malevolent intentions – in the vasty depths of the Universe.

Accompanied by Raul Endymion, an ex-soldier and hunter's guide, who has been appointed as her bodyguard, Aenae flees from the forces of the Pax towards the rebel Ousters. *Endymion* is Raul's confession, written while he is incarcerated in an impenetrable Schrodinger Cat box in high orbit, awaiting execution by cyanide gas which will be released by the random decay of a radio-isotope. At one level, Raul's adventures with Aenae are little more than a glorified platform computer game, for as in a game one must advance through increasingly

BOOKS



REVIEWED

Hyperion (Slight Return)

Paul J. McAuley

difficult levels, so Raul and Aenae, accompanied by an imperturbable and resourceful android, must navigate between portals of the farcaster system which Aenae is able to reopen, following the river which once ran through the worlds of the Hegemony.

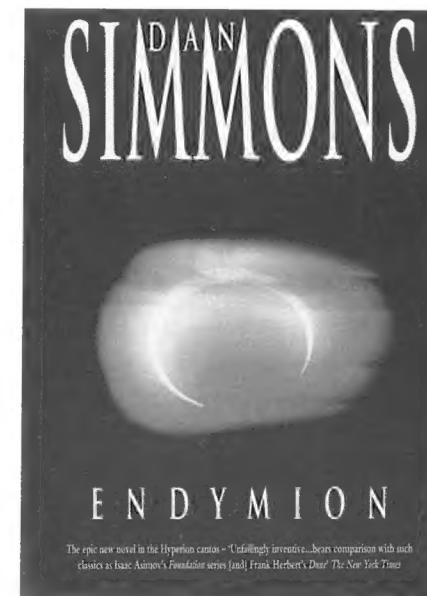
The scenarios which the three face are ingeniously constructed, yet too often they are able to escape through a suddenly-revealed trapdoor, and one has the feeling that Simmons is not fully engaged with his characters as he manipulates them through an infinitely extensible plot which does no more than delay their arrival at their goal. Yet this is more than redeemed by the second strand of the plot, which follows the starship captain Father Fedrico de Soya and his loyal crew, who have been charged by the highest authority of the Pax with pursuing and destroying Aenae and her companions. Aenae can step easily from world to world by using the portal system; De Soya must pursue her through Einsteinian space, and each time he must be brutally resur-

rected because the acceleration required reduces his body to organic sludge. It is de Soya's suffering and growing doubt that lends a human dimension to the otherwise rather mechanical advancement of the plot; and it is upon his conscience that the novel ultimately turns. (Raul promises that he is not speculating when he relates de Soya's story, and it will be a trivial exercise for those who have read *The Hyperion Cantos* to understand how Raul can have gained de Soya's memories.)

Although *The Hyperion Cantos* ended with a fulfilling sense of closure, in *Endymion* Simmons has skillfully reopened its vast panoramas, hinting at greater vistas to come, and widening the theme of the possibilities of human transcendence within the frame of the vast history of the universe. Like its predecessor, *Endymion* is packed with sf devices which have been polished and refurbished with precise skill, evoking a densely populated history set against the backdrop of the universe. One cannot quite shake off the feeling that Simmons is employing his skills in service of a commercially rather than artistically inspired sequel, but there is always a sense of deliberate authorial distancing and a certain chill cerebralism in Simmons's narratives, and what matters more, the impulse or the finished work? How well he rises to the challenges he has set himself must await the second, concluding novel, *The Rise of Endymion*, but like his pilgrims, we travel in hope.

Were it not for the fact that the return of the grand gestures of space opera, deployed to explore the beginnings and ends of the universe, was a central feature of sf in the late 1980s and early 1990s (think Banks, Baxter, Bear, Benford, Brin, and we are not even out of the B's), one could make much of the pleasing symmetry of having to hand both *Endymion* and *The Wild* (HarperCollins, £15.99), which is the second volume of David Zindell's epic *A Requiem for Homo Sapiens*, itself a sequel to his sprawling cosmological space opera *Neverness*.

The Wild continues the story, begun in *The Broken God*, of Danlo the Wild, son of Mallory Ringess, the star pilot who became a god and vanished, and who is also the narrator of his son's story. It is becoming clear that Danlo's story is both a recapitulation and deepening of that of his father. *The Broken God* told of Danlo's apprenticeship to the Order of Mystic Mathematicians and Other Seekers of the Ineffable Flame and his elevation to the rank of starship pilot; *The Wild* describes his long quest from star to star as he searches for his father and for the Architects of the Universal Cybernetic Church, who have begun to dest-



J.G. Ballard
interviewed by
David Pringle